

SEX UNITY, POLARITY, OR COMPLEMENTARITY?

by

Christine Allen  
Associate Professor of Philosophy  
Concordia University  
Montreal, Quebec

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Today, when we look at the way in which women and men think about their identities and relationships, it soon becomes apparent that most people's perceptions fall into two main categories. The first theory, or what I call sex unity, involves the belief that there are no significant differences between the two sexes, or at least that there ought not to be any significant differences. Today, this perception of woman and man is often referred to as the unisex model of human existence.

In direct contrast to this view is the one which can be called sex polarity. This view has existed for centuries, indeed, from the very beginning of western intellectual life. It involves the belief that women and men are significantly different and that one sex is inherently superior to the other. In most periods of western history this theory has claimed that man is superior to woman. Today, however, many people are arguing that women are superior to men. Since the belief in male superiority appeared first, chronologically, in western history, I will call it simply sex polarity and, since the belief in female superiority is more recent, I will call it reverse sex polarity. Both theories are a version of sex polarity because the two sexes are interpreted as significantly different, and one sex is considered superior to the other.

Nearly all debate about sex identity today seems to be torn between these two theories. This tendency is found in legal debate, in research, in questions about institutional structures, and within the home. In short, we have become trapped in a false 'either/or', in a dichotomy of either sex unity or sex polarity.

The possibility that must be considered today is whether or not

there may be a third alternative to these two theories of sex identity. I would like to suggest that there is such a possibility and that this theory could be called sex complementarity. This theory contains the view that there are significant differences between woman and man but that both sexes are equal in dignity. It holds the further claim that society ought to be structured in such a way as to bring about the fullest possible development of this complementarity in the everyday lives of women and men.

The following chart summarizes, very briefly, the conceptual differences between the three theories.

	differentiation	equality
Sex unity	-----	X
Sex polarity	X	-----
Sex complementarity	X	X

Sex unity defends equality, but loses differentiation, while sex polarity defends differentiation but loses equality. It could be said, then, that sex complementarity is the only theory to insist both upon differentiation and equality between women and men.

Now that the conceptual structure of the three theories has been put forward, the next question is to determine whether or not it is mere wishful thinking to seek a third alternative to sex unity and sex polarity. The philosophical defence of sex complementarity is extremely important; historically many powerful arguments have been put forward for sex polarity

in its traditional affirmation of male superiority. Some of the most important theorists in this tradition are Aristotle, St. Thomas, Rousseau, and Freud. Reverse sex polarity has been defended by such theorists as Agrippa, Montagu, and Daly. Sex unity has also had its articulate defenders: Plato, Wollstonecraft, Marx, Jaggar, and Firestone attempted in various ways to argue for the abolition of the sex distinction. This view seems to be defended most stringently by the majority of contemporary feminists, although reverse sex polarity is also defended by some radical feminists.

In contrast to this overwhelming philosophical support for versions of sex polarity and sex unity, sex complementarity has not had the same tradition of defence. Some theorists, such as Hildegard of Bingen, Mill, and Jung, have sought after a philosophical foundation for sex complementarity, and yet they always seemed to fall short of the goal. Contemporary theorists such as Friedan and Bernard appear to assume a complementarity model, but they offer no proof for its philosophical viability. It is, therefore, extremely important to search for a method by which such a philosophical foundation can be found and presented. In order to defend this third alternative, arguments must be found which will be as strong as, if not stronger than, those already presented by the sex polarity and sex unity theorists.

A careful examination of arguments about sex identity put forward in the history of philosophy may offer a clue to the most effective method for approaching the issue today. Historically, philosophers approached the question of the respective identities of woman and man through asking

four questions:

1. What do woman and man contribute to generation?
2. Are women and men wise in the same way?
3. Are women and men virtuous in the same way?
4. How are women and men opposite?

The answers which traditional philosophers gave these questions were influenced by the scientific data available to them, by their own intellectual schema, and by the social conditions of their times. The questions they asked, however, seem to transcend a particular time and place. They point to fundamental categories of human existence. Therefore, even though we might want to reject many of the answers which various philosophers gave to these questions, the questions themselves can be considered central to any search for the truth about sex identity.

To be more precise, it can be seen that the above four questions reflect our material, thinking, and acting nature as woman or man. In addition, they bring into focus our relation to one another as well as to the world. It would seem, then, that an effective method for developing a philosophical defence of sex complementarity would be to reflect again on these fundamental questions in order to determine whether our own contemporary scientific data, intellectual schema, and social conditions can offer a solid foundation from which to defend the equality and differentiation of women and men.

#### What do women and men contribute to generation?

The invention of the microscope has allowed us to discover that women as well as men contribute active seed to generation. In addition,

both contributions contain half of the needed structure of the newly conceived embryo. These material givens of our human situation directly contradict centuries of sex polarity arguments which claimed that the woman provided only passive material to generation. The modern discovery of active female seed thus repudiated one of the fundamental defences of traditional sex polarity. In addition, the contemporary recognition of the equally active participation of male and female seed in reproduction supports the theory of the basic equality of woman and man in this activity.

It is important to note the further point that reflection on generation also reveals a significant differentiation between woman and man. For, even though each sex provides half of the necessary structure of the new life, it is not possible for two contributions from the same sex to have the same result, i.e. two female seeds or two male seeds will not be able to generate a child. Another way of saying this is that the two contributions must have a differentiated route of access, a different pathway, one provided by the male and the other by the female. Therefore, merely by considering the barest facts about generation, we have found an initial support for the two basic premises of sex complementarity, namely that the two sexes are equal and significantly different. Their equality is derived from the chromosomal structure of the seed, and their differentiation is derived from the respective pathways that the seeds follow.

#### Are women and men wise in the same way?

Without describing the nature of wisdom in detail, we can say that

it involves at least the capacity to think or reason well. When we reflect on what we know about the thinking capacities of women and men today, once again we find an interesting shift in scientific knowledge from what had been believed in the past. It has often been argued, although never proven, that women and men have different reasoning capacities. Philosophers in the sex polarity tradition have claimed that men were superior because of their capacity for discursive reasoning, and now theorists from the reverse sex polarity tradition argue that women are superior because of their capacity for intuitive thinking. There has been no scientific evidence which shows that one sex or the other, by virtue of its sex, is limited either to discursive or to intuitive reasoning. In fact, it is become more clear that women and men have potentially the same capacity for discursive and intuitive thinking. It would seem to follow from this, then, that women and men are equal with respect to their reasoning capacities.

Sex unity theorists often imply that wisdom demands a complete lack of differentiation between women and men as reflected in language and in thought. They seek to remove all words with sex differentiation from language, to change institutional structures so that no differentiation between the sexes will be possible, and to change physical appearance so that no differentiation between the sexes will be visible. The sex unity theorists conclude from the equality of the capacity for reasoning in women and men, that the thought content of the two sexes is, or should be, sexually non-differentiated. This argument, however, neglects one important fact. Although the reasoning capacity is the same for women and men, the

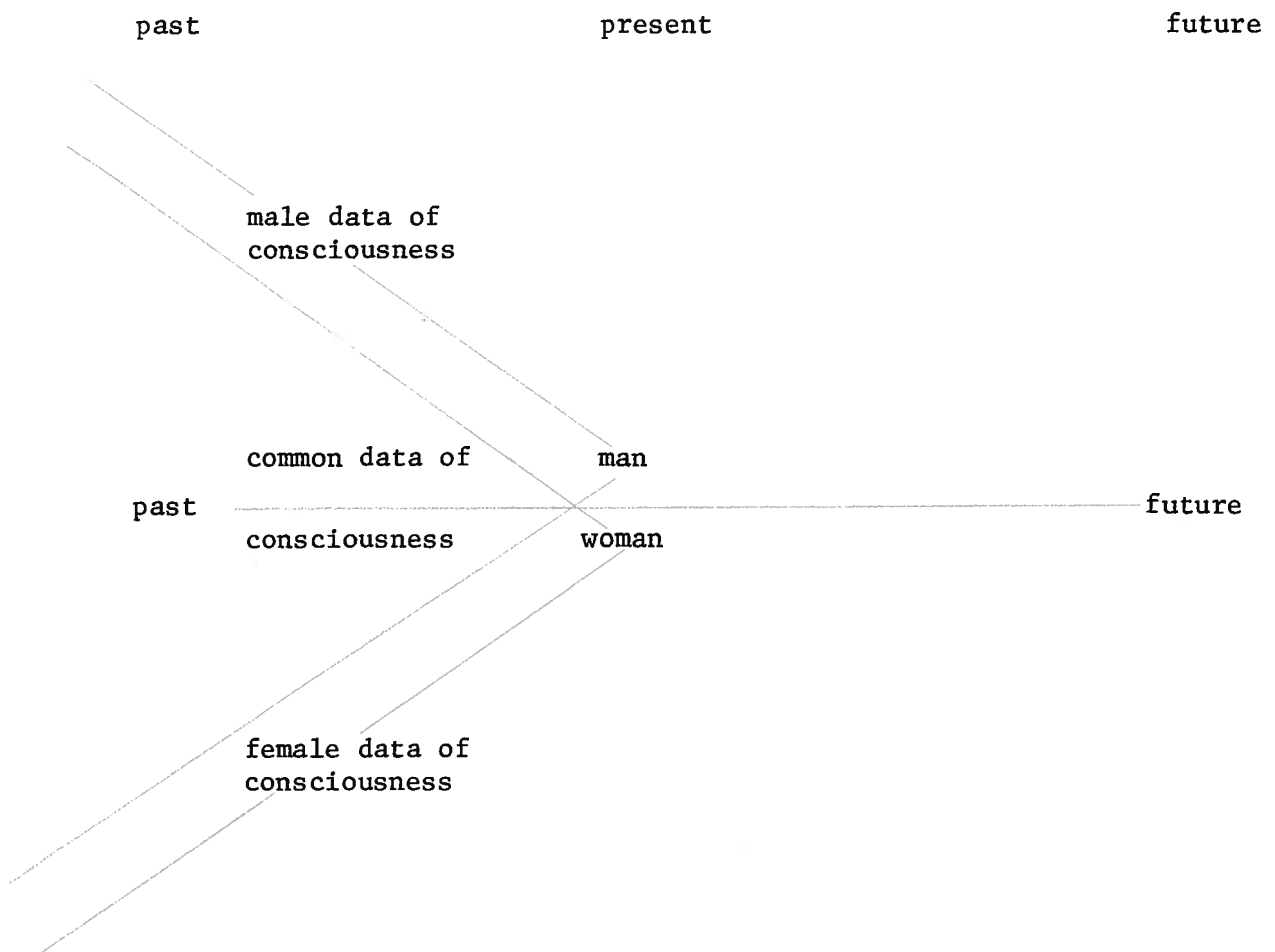
content of consciousness is different in a number of significant respects.

The difference between the content of thought for woman and man is drawn from their relation to a specific kind of body, to a specific recent past (since their birth), and to a specific inherited past (within their culture). This means that when a person thinks about his or her own identity, the data which is available to his/her mind is different. We could say that the pathway of information differs according to sex. The lived experience of the body is different for a man than it is for a woman; being brought up in the western world as female or male brings to consciousness an entirely different range of data; being born into a world of stereotypes, archetypes, and historical facts provides a different range of information for a man's reason to appropriate as a specific history than for a woman. Therefore, we can say that reflection on the different data available to the reason of woman and man points to a significant differentiation between the sexes.

This difference in data of consciousness for woman and man does not deny that there may be a large range of common data for individual women and men. There are a great many other factors, such as race, religion, class, domicile, etc. to consider. Therefore, while there is a common bond of data for women and men with similar historical situations, each person has a small band of data for consciousness which is specifically related to sex differentiation. A visual summary of this explanation is found in Diagram I below.

The question originally posed by this essay concerned whether or not women and men are wise in the same way. Wisdom involves, among other



Diagram I

things, using the reason well. It would seem to follow, then, that in terms of having the same capacities for reasoning, women and men are wise in the same way, but that in terms of the particular kind of data they reason about, women and men are wise in a different way. It would seem, then, that this initial consideration of the way in which a person aims towards wisdom supports the two basic claims of sex complementarity, that women and men are equal, but significantly different.

Are women and men virtuous in the same way?

Once again, without giving a philosophical explanation for the origin and nature of virtue, it can at least be said that virtue involves an ability to act well. Reflection on virtue, then, raises the question: do women and men have the same or different capacities for action?

In order to answer this question it is useful to understand action as involving the three phases of assessment, decision making, and forward movement. It has been argued by theorists in the sex polarity tradition that women have a different capacity for assessing situations than men. For example, it has been suggested that women merely have opinions while men have knowledge, or that women jump to conclusions while men consider things more carefully. In a similar way, it has also been argued that women are not capable of making decisions, because their emotions overpower their reason. Certainly, contemporary experience has shown that women as well as men have the same potential for assessing what needs to be done in the world, for deciding what they ought to do, and for carrying this decision forward in action. In short, it is becoming increasingly clear that women and men have a similar capacity for action.

However, does this similarity of capacity imply that women and men ought to do the same things? Sex unity theorists would conclude that it does. They argue that the similarity of acting capacity, or ability to shape the world, demands a rigorous effort to get rid of anything that hinders a person because of his or her sex. In the extreme, it is suggested that all differences in biological contexts for action should be eliminated through the introduction of the test tube baby. The sex unity theorists, in this way, view male or female identity as something to be gotten rid of.

It seems, however, that while it may be correct to argue for the equality of the acting capacity of women and men, that there is also an important difference in context for action given to woman and man. Therefore, just as the fact that the two sexes have the same reasoning capacity is compatible with the conclusion that they have a different context of consciousness, so, the fact that the two sexes have the same acting capacity is compatible with the conclusion that woman and man may have a significantly different context for action in many situations. Therefore, women and men under certain conditions ought to act differently.

If we take two traditional virtues associated with the two sexes, a different historical context will emerge. Two of the inheritances of western patriarchal society are the following moral claims:

Men ought to rule and women to obey.

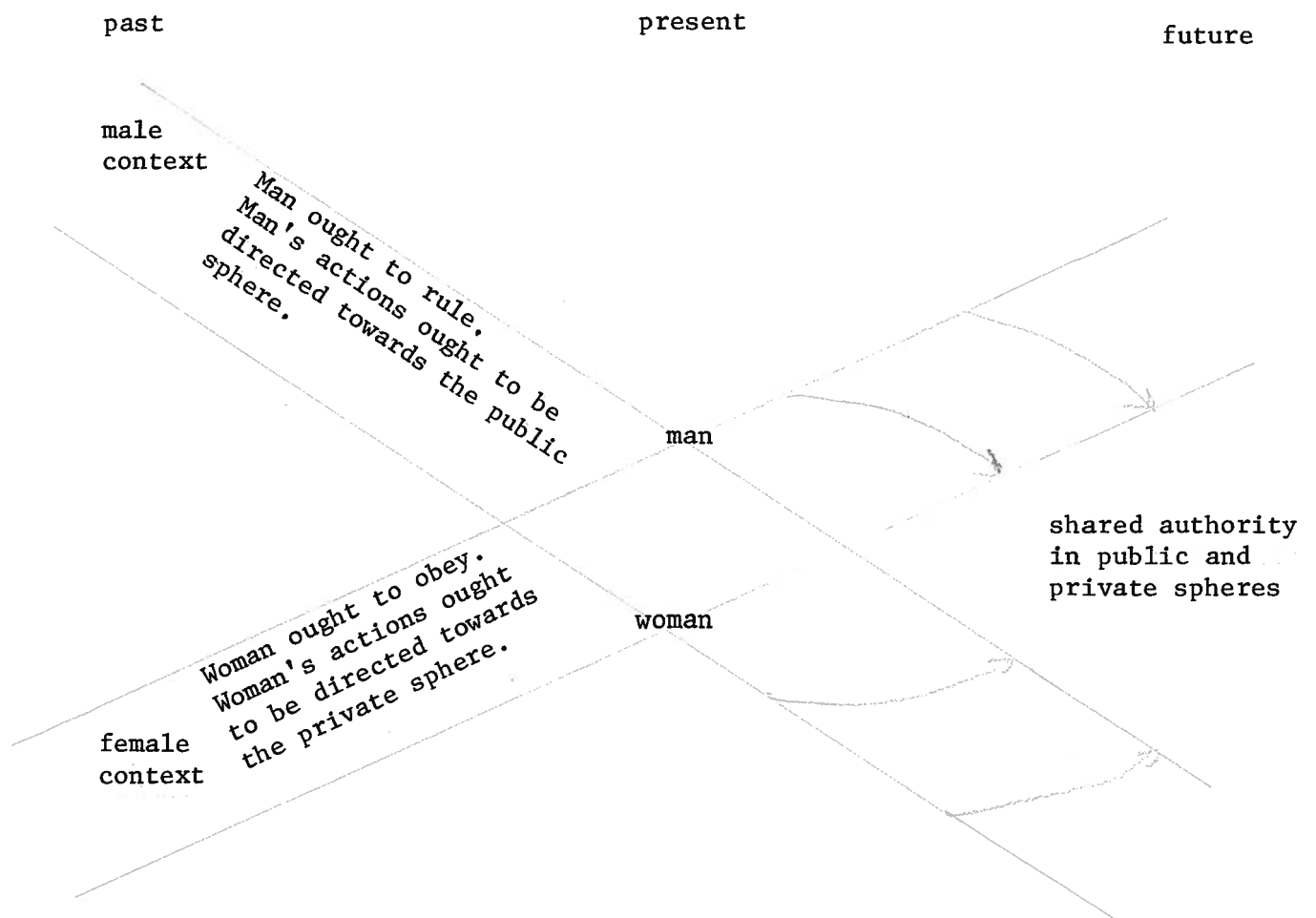
Man's actions ought to be directed towards the public sphere and woman's actions ought to be directed towards the private sphere.

One of the basic assumptions of sex complementarity, as I understand it,

involves an aim to develop are shared authority of woman and man in both public and private spheres of activity. Sex complementarity claims that women and men bear equal responsibility for the quality of life at home and in society in general. However, the way in which they approach the goal will differ in some respects because of their different historical and contemporary contexts. That is, women and men have a different pathway of access to the same goal. In Diagram II below this difference is visualized.

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Women and men today inherit different contexts for action because patriarchal society in the western world embodies the basic views expressed through the sex polarity theory. A woman with an inheritance of patriarchy has a different context for action from a man with an inheritance of patriarchy. From Diagram II it can be seen that women inherit a context for action in which it is considered virtuous for her to obey man, while man's virtue is associated with ruling. This means that if there is a common goal of society to move towards shared authority, it might be more virtuous for a woman to practice the skills of ruling in assuming authority in a particular context and more virtuous for a man to practice the skills of obeying in sharing authority, than the other way around. Therefore, an assumption of leadership could be understood as a virtuous act for a woman and the abdication of leadership for a man in the same situation. The man would be virtuous precisely by not ruling, but by electing to follow, while the woman would be virtuous in the same situation by attempting to rule and giving up the position of follower. Therefore, the different pathways of access to the same situation lead to the choice

Diagram II

of different virtuous actions for the woman than for the man.

Another example of the same phenomenon can be seen in an analysis of the second context mentioned in Diagram II. Patriarchy has often left the legacy that a woman ought to practice her virtues primarily in the home, while a man ought to practice his virtues primarily in society at large. Sex complementarity, as I have defined it, seeks to make women and men aware of their responsibility in both the public and private spheres of activity. It could follow from this, that a woman or a man might be virtuous by performing the opposite act in the same situation. A very practical application of this principle may be seen in a consideration of housework. In this context it might be virtuous for a man to do a particular task in the house just as it could be virtuous for the woman not to do the same task in order to allow the man the opportunity to assume his responsibility in the private sphere. Similarly, in the public sphere it could be virtuous for a man to withhold his opinions and actions in the same context in which it would be virtuous for a woman to speak out and act. Once again, the particular action must be understood in terms of the context in which women and men inherit because of the history of their particular sex.

It must be mentioned in passing that these examples are not meant to apply to all women and men without exception. Obviously, individuals have a variety of other factors which influence their contexts of actions. There are, for instance, women who have all their lives been able to take leadership positions in public life without any difficulty, and there are men who have equally shared in responsibility in the private sphere.

These persons, however, are the exceptions in our society. A philosophy of sex complementarity ought to be established upon the common context of women and men. Therefore, the exceptions ought to be properly understood within the broader framework of the general pattern of activity common to both sexes.

It must also be emphasized that the above examples are not meant to imply that in all situations women ought to lead and men to follow, or that in all respects women ought to move into the public sphere of activity and men into the private sphere of activity. On the contrary, the goal is to have a society in which authority is shared by women and men in all areas of life. The sex unity theory would agree with the goal of shared authority, but would claim that it makes no difference whether the people involved in the authority are male or female. The sex polarity theory, on the other hand, would argue that men ought to have the primary authority. The reverse sex polarity argues sometimes that women ought to have the primary authority, and other times that there ought not to be any authority in society. Sex complementarity insists that the equality of women and men demands a society with shared authority, but that the sharing of authority by significantly different kinds of persons will be reflected in a creative dynamism which this difference unleashes. Women generally approach authority from a different pathway from men in both the private and public spheres of activity.

In this brief consideration, the two examples mentioned are enough to indicate the application of the basic theory of sex complementarity to the context of virtuous activity. We have seen in the study of virtue

that there is an equality in capacity for action and a differentiation in contexts for action which are present in women and men. Therefore, once again the two basic premises of sex complementarity, equality and differentiation have been demonstrated.

How are women and men opposite?

Historically, the question of the kind of opposition of the sexes has been phrased in a number of different ways. As early as 500 B.C., in the Pythagorean table of opposites, the question was posed in terms of the opposition of male and female. Later on, in the 19th century, philosophers were more interested in the opposition of the masculine and feminine. Today, I am posing the question in terms of the opposition of woman and man. The reason for this particular formulation is due to a central emphasis upon the concept of person. The opposition of male and female included the sexual differentiation of a wide variety of animals, while the opposition of masculine and feminine concentrated instead upon qualities of character. Only the sexual opposition between women and men concentrates on their identities as persons.

The first claim of sex complementarity, that women and men are equal, arises in and through their identity as persons. This inherent quality of dignity and worth is the natural birthright of each boy or girl, present even if everyone who receives a child into the world devalues it in relation to the opposite sex. It is also present even if experiences in the world twist and destroy any visible trace of this fact in a particular way in which the individual person's character develops. It follows, then, that the world ought to be reformed in such a way that



this basic equality of woman and man would be rendered visible within it at every possible opportunity.

The second claim of sex complementarity, that women and men are significantly different, arises in and through their inheritance as different kinds of persons. Rational consciousness, the particular gift of human life, reveals this difference. Women and men are significantly different in their most important human activities. This difference has been characterized as a difference in pathways to the world. In generation, these were given the physical description in observing the way in which female seed and male seed travel to meet one another for conception. In wisdom, these were given a thought-oriented description in the specific delineation of sex-related data of consciousness. In virtue, these were given an action-oriented description in interpreting the different contexts of woman and man.

It is possible, now, to summarize the ways in which this consideration of generation, wisdom, and virtue has produced strong evidence for the philosophy of sex complementarity.

	<u>Equality</u>	<u>Differentiation</u>
<u>Generation</u>	The seed of woman and man have the same basic structure.	The seed of woman and man approach one another from a different pathway.
<u>Wisdom</u>	Women and men have the same capacities for thought.	Women and men have different pathways of data for thought.
<u>Virtue</u>	Women and men can have the same capacities for action.	Women and men have different pathways or contexts for action.

It would seem to follow that there are as good reasons to support sex

complementarity as there are to support either sex unity or sex polarity.

It has not yet been proven that sex complementarity is a better theory than sex unity or sex polarity, although I certainly believe that this is the case. A proof can be demonstrated for the superiority of sex complementarity over the other two views; such a proof demands a more thorough explanation of the concept of person as comprised of a specific materiality, rationality, spirituality, and individuality. Within a more elaborate framework it would be possible to show that sex unity and sex polarity neglect some of the central aspects of the person, which sex complementarity preserves. Sex complementarity will be shown to be a more inclusive and more fertile theory than the other two alternatives. Within the limit of the present paper, it is not possible to construct such a proof; we will rest here with the conclusion that sex complementarity can be defended as a way out of the false 'either/or' of sex polarity versus sex unity.

Finally, for those who are interested in finding a third alternative to sex unity or sex polarity, it would be useful to attempt to apply the basic claims of sex complementarity to specific contexts of your own lives. For example, how might sex complementarity be applied in legal debate, in research, in institutions, in the home? In each case, we can ask: "How can I help to aid equality and appropriate differentiation of women and men? How can I support differentiation without losing equality?" Sex complementarity ultimately must be defended, not only upon philosophical grounds, but in the very lives of individual women and men around the world.

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